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World Chronicle

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JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, International Documents Review
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WORK OF THE FIFTH COMMITTEE

Ngoni Francis SENGWE, Chairman of the Fifth (Administrative and Budgetary) Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, reviews the work of that committee, which advises the General Assembly on all financial and administrative matters. According to Mr. Sengwe, the United Nations is facing a financial problem not because the Member States lack the funds but because they lack the political will. The Fifth Committee recommends that the General Assembly urge Member States to pay their dues on time, in full and without conditions. It also advises the General Assembly on the financial implications of any programme suggested by other committees. Mr. Sengwe believes that the staff is the greatest asset of the United Nations and that the international civil service should be protected and respected.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The General Assembly, one of the main organs of the United Nations, meets in a regular session for three months every year to discuss international issues. This year more than 160 items are on its agenda. In order to finish its work on time, the General Assembly divides its work load among the various committees.

Our guest today, Ngoni Francis Sengwe, is Chairman of the Administrative and Budgetary Committee, known as the Fifth Committee. Mr. Sengwe is also the Deputy Permanent Representative of Zimbabwe to the United Nations. Joining me to talk with Mr. Sengwe are Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International and Bhaskar Menon of the International Documents Review.

Mr. Sengwe, welcome to World Chronicle. Mr. Chairman, the Fifth Committee, the Administrative and Budgetary Committee, by its very title, of course, is involved in the questions relating to the United Nations budget. The Organization's been going through some rather rough times, with about half of the Member States in arrears with their contributions—not, I believe, Zimbabwe, which is paid up. How difficult is this making the task of the Fifth Committee?

SENGWE: Thank you. The major issue right now is that we are operating on the basis of a budget of $2.6 billion for this biennium, which means 1996-1997, so everything else has to fit within that budget. In addition, of course, we still have the arrears that are outstanding. That has been—

LITTLEJOHNS: Amounting to something over $2 billion, I believe. Including for peace-keeping.

SENGWE: That's correct.

MENON: I understand that it's not a problem of not having enough money, but it's a question of having to fit a really large number of activities under a capped budget. Is that it?

SENGWE: The particular reason why we have that $2.6 billion—of course it was negotiated in the 50th session, and the Assembly saw fit to come up with that budget ceiling, as it were—it was in recognition of the shrinking amount of resources. And therefore, in spite of that, we still have the problem of arrears, of course. And the General Assembly in its wisdom usually has some agenda items or programmes that it would like funded, but it would have to look for resources. I must hasten to add that there is yet a provision which

dates back to 1986, a landmark resolution, so-called 41/213, which made a provision for a contingency fund, which was .75 per cent.

MENON: But Mr. Sengwe, the situation of the UN now is that overall every single aspect of it is under reform, or people are trying to change the way the UN functions. So this time in your Committee you've had two major problems put on your lap: One is the whole problem of staff-management relations, the administration of the UN; and on the other hand you have this whole problem of the medium-term plan, you have the problem of the budget. How have you managed to deal with all this? Has there been a fairly amicable relationship among the delegations?

SENGWE: The relations—there is really a camaraderie spirit among the delegations. One would not, of course, rule out the disagreements in the context of negotiations. But the spirit is one that is amicable. And in particular this year it's called a personnel year, where we handle old issues that are related to human resources. And so we have a lot of issues to deal with, including career development, including the question of assessment.

MENON: Is there any kind of consensus on personnel issues? Because I've heard staff members of the UN complain that the international civil service is under threat of extinction, that the values, the core values of the civil service are under attack by delegations. How far is this true?

SENGWE: To the contrary, delegations are upholding the international nature of the civil service. During the session, delegations spoke out fervently in support for maintaining the international nature of the civil service and respecting the principles as outlined in the Charter.

MENON: But didn't one of your ambassadors, from Africa I mean, the Ambassador from Sierra Leone, make a very impassioned plea for the integrity of the civil service to be maintained?

SENGWE: Indeed, he did. In view of some of what is happening in the system. This is in relation to the so-called "gratis" personnel.

NGUYEN: Mr. Sengwe, what country or countries will emerge as the largest contributor to the UN in the future if the United States continues to fall behind in its payments? Which are the countries that are the most eager to help fill in the gap if a big Power like the US is not paying its dues to the UN?

SENGWE: I'm not quite sure that there would be somebody who would come forward and say, "I'm stepping in the United States' shoes", as such, because this is a political decision which the General Assembly has to decide on, the amount or the percentage that the United States pays.

NGUYEN: But are there any talks or negotiations to change the system of funding to really ask countries which can pay to pay, and those who cannot would pay less? The US actually cannot pay 25 per cent of the budget, and it has asked to reduce that to 20 per cent. Will that be obtained in the near future? And in this case, as long as Japan can pay, why can it not pay more than the 15 per cent now?

SENGWE: That, Tuyet, is a political decision. Because at the moment, as we discuss this issue, there are negotiations going on regarding the scales of assessment, and that is where the 20 per cent ceiling is being discussed. And the General Assembly will have to come up with a scale that is acceptable to all delegations. Because the major principle here is the capacity to pay—the country that has the economy, that is able to bear. And in fact my understanding is that even 25 per cent is lower than the actual capacity to pay, it should be about 28 per cent. So it was a political decision that was taken by the General Assembly.

NGUYEN: What's going on about reforming the UN funding system? Where do you stand now?

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the scale of assessments?

NGUYEN: That also, and to a larger extent the whole system of funding UN activities. Because there are talks about this now.

SENGWE: Indeed, those discussions are going on elsewhere—for instance, on the strengthening of the United Nations. But in the context of the Fifth Committee, the Fifth Committee is charged with looking at the scales of assessment, and the scales of assessment deal with the assessed contributions. And the problem as we have it is more of a political will, political will to pay. It's not a question of a lack of resources. So it's as simple as that. And so the crisis is not where it is said it is, but elsewhere.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sengwe, it seems to me a little odd, and I'm sure it must seem odd to many people, that the lowest contribution of Member States is something less than $109,000 a year, yet a large number of those Member States have not come up with that relatively small sum. I mean, isn't it rather a ridiculous situation that these are Member States who have the same voting rights as major Powers, like the United States, Russia, and so on, China, yet their contributions are so small, and even that they don't pay. What can your Committee do to deal with that kind of thing?

SENGWE: As I indicated earlier, this is more of a political will, because the Member States under the Charter have an obligation; this is a contractual obligation. When they joined the United Nations, they undertook to honour these commitments.

LITTLEJOHNS: But they're not honouring them, that's the point.

SENGWE: In an organization like the United Nations, there's nothing much you can do except to urge them to honour their commitment, and that's why in the Committee throughout the years the emphasis has been on urging Member States to pay in full, on time, and without conditions.

NGUYEN: Mr. Sengwe, China, for example, now pays 0.73 or .79 per cent of the budget. And China says it is ready to increase that contribution. Why can't the Fifth Committee work out something that will accommodate right away those who think politically they want a larger responsibility in the UN system by paying more, and they are ready to do that? Why can't the Fifth Committee start right away looking into that possibility?

SENGWE: Certainly if a delegation comes forward and says that they would like to increase their percentage, the percentage of what they are paying, nobody will stop them. There are cases where, for instance, I think Portugal moved from Group C to Group B–

MENON: For peace-keeping, right?

SENGWE: For peace-keeping.

LITTLEJOHNS: What does that mean, from Group C?

SENGWE: It means that the percentage they pay is more than they would pay. The Group B is more or less for developed countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why did they do that? Did they volunteer to do that?

MENON: Yes, they switched with another country, right? One of the former Soviet republics.

LITTLEJOHNS: I see.

MENON: But has China actually come forward and said that they would like to pay more?

SENGWE: I'm not aware of that proposal myself. But what I know is that, in the context of zeroing in on the schedule, which must be ready by the end of 1997 for the future assessments, delegations will look at all the issues.

MENON: Could I ask you, with reference to China, about a decade ago China's percentage of the budget was 3 per cent, if I remember right, or in that region. How did it go down, when China's economy is by all accounts expanding rapidly?

SENGWE: It is a question that has been raised, but it is a question too that the Committee on Contributions has to look at and recommend to the General Assembly in terms of the shifts in the percentages that Member States pay.

MENON: Could I ask you – you mentioned political will – to what extent is political will related to UN reform? To what extent are countries saying, "Look, we're wasting our money by giving it to the Organization, we want real reform before we'll pay"? To what extent is that a factor that you have to deal with?

SENGWE: We have heard that, and yet the emphasis in terms of the contributions to the United Nations has been payment in full, on time, without conditions. And then you can talk about reform. Because it's our Organization, together, collectively. And we have the possibility of working on what we think needs to be reformed, and in that respect there are various working groups, I think there are about five of them, that are in progress dealing with almost all aspects of reform, except ICJ.

LITTLEJOHNS: The International Court of Justice.

SENGWE: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Ngoni Francis Sengwe, Chairman of the Fifth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly.

NGUYEN: I wanted to enter into another area of the budget. How much of the biennial budget—what percentage of that budget goes to salaries, for example?

SENGWE: The salaries take almost 70 per cent.

NGUYEN: 70 per cent of the budget.

SENGWE: Yes.

NGUYEN: So what is left is divided to—is sent where? For operational activities or programmes?

SENGWE: The remainder goes to the programmes as designated by the General Assembly. And I'm sure you've heard the statement that the personnel of the United Nations is the greatest asset of the Organization, because the United Nations is a service organization. We are serving Member States. And that's why you have the bulk of the budget going to personnel.

NGUYEN: And how much of the 30 per cent remaining goes to Peace-keeping Operations?

MENON: None of it.

NGUYEN: None of it?

SENGWE: Because peace-keeping has a separate budget.

NGUYEN: Oh, I see.

LITTLEJOHNS: So what does the 30 per cent go for? The other 30 per cent?

SENGWE: It would go to—we have—in the General Assembly, for instance, we have the assistance programmes to various countries, you have administrative arrangements, electoral assistance—

MENON: Overhead.

SENGWE: The overhead. You have DPI, for instance, DPI offices throughout the countries, throughout the Member States. And those, that's taken up by that.

MENON: One of the problems you've had in the Committee is that of a difference of opinion on what the medium-term plan perspective should be. Usually when the UN plans over a seven-year period, the Secretary-General comes up with a perspective statement, saying, these are the major problems that I see; this is what we have to do. This time around, when the Secretary-General produced a medium-term plan perspective, the developing countries didn't like it. And so he had to go back and write a note. But the developed countries liked the perspective that the Secretary-General produced. And this has produced a rather odd situation where you might not have a perspective statement. What exactly is happening with that?

SENGWE: The Member States have negotiated on what would come up with a consensus on that particular issue, because at the end of the meeting with the Committee on Programme Coordination there was no agreement, because, as you have rightly pointed out, you had the divide between the developing countries and developed countries. For the North, it was mostly the emphasis on what was agreed upon during the 50th Anniversary Declaration, to reflect that in the medium-term plan as we go into the next century.

MENON: I see.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sengwe, the Fifth Committee is considered by some people to be the most important committee in the General Assembly, because, of course, you control the public purse. What are your relations with the other committees? How do you deal with them? Do they make recommendations to you that you act upon? What is the relationship?

SENGWE: The other five committees do submit their decisions—through, of course, the Secretariat—to the Fifth Committee for consideration in areas where there is a programme budget implication, so that the Fifth Committee then would advise the General Assembly on the financial implications of a given resolution. Now, for instance, the Third Committee [Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee], during the 51st regular session—

LITTLEJOHNS: That's social affairs.

SENGWE: Social affairs.

MENON: Human rights.

LITTLEJOHNS: Human rights, yes.

SENGWE: —did decide on the question of drugs. And that programme budget implication had to be considered by the Fifth Committee. And there are constant consultations between the chair of the main committees and myself, because these items are inter-related, so that where items would have to come over to the Fifth Committee, we would have consulted with the relevant committees. And, on the other hand, on our side, where we think that the other committee, for instance, on the internal system of justice, we

would send the issue to the Sixth Committee, the Legal Committee, in order to advise the Fifth Committee on the course of action.

LITTLEJOHNS: Has there ever been a case where one of the other committees has come up with a proposal, adopted a resolution for a new programme, a new mandate, and the Fifth Committee has said, "Forget it, because we don't think it's a good idea, we don't have the funds, we aren't going to recommend the funds for it"? Has that ever happened? In effect, the Fifth Committee vetoing a decision of another committee?

SENGWE: I'm not aware of such a situation, but the Fifth Committee recommends to the General Assembly. So it is up to the General Assembly to decide whether to take up the issue. In fact, as you are aware, it's a two-stage process, where the other committees do adopt resolutions, and before those resolutions are finally adopted by the General Assembly, the Fifth Committee looks at the programme budget implications. And that's where the Fifth Committee then advises the General Assembly on the financial implications.

MENON: This raises the whole question of priorities. With a capped budget, it's critical that you establish which activities are priority, which activities are not. So is there a situation in which the Fifth Committee might actually recommend that such and such a recommendation falls into a low priority area? Is that within your mandate?

SENGWE: It is strictly the mandate of that particular committee, because the programme budget implication is also given to the relevant committee. Because Member States have the right to include new programmes, and so if they decide that it is the right thing to do, what the Committee does is to make recommendations. Upon, of course, the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.

NGUYEN: Mr. Sengwe, there is something also that needs to be explained. Every year you approve budget programmes, what you call financial implications for each of the programmes. But the UN is in the red for many years. And I wonder whether you approve or worked out those budgets without looking behind to whether you had the resources or not. And if you don't have the resources, what happens to those programmes?

SENGWE: We do, we look at the resources, and that's where our advice to the General Assembly comes in. And if we do not have—if the money is not available, the General Assembly has to decide whether to appropriate or to assess further—

NGUYEN: But usually the General Assembly, well, most of the time, approves whatever you recommend.

SENGWE: They do, but if there is such a programme which the General Assembly feels so strongly about, the General Assembly is supreme. The General Assembly has a right to ask for further assessment from Member States.

NGUYEN: If the UN system continues with this kind of budget shortage, do you foresee any staff lay-off in the future? Beside the 1000 that already have been, you know, terminated?

SENGWE: The 1000 is under—you know, there is a dispute, actually. As you recall from the 50th session, there was a resolution that was adopted in the Fifth Committee regarding—

LITTLEJOHNS: That was in 1995.

SENGWE: In 1996.

LITTLEJOHNS: 1996?

SENGWE: September 1996. —regarding the so-called involuntary separations, where the Secretariat was seen to have exceeded the mandate of the General Assembly of the vacancy rate beyond 6.4 per cent. So the lay-offs, of course, will be decided upon by the General Assembly, because the General Assembly has the full picture of what is available, what resources we do have.

NGUYEN: The 1000 professionals that have been laid off can always dispute that, the termination of their contracts?

SENGWE: No, no, no. What happened with this was that the General Assembly decided that the Secretariat had over-stepped its mandate. Because the agreed—

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say the Secretariat, you essentially mean the Secretary-General?

SENGWE: Of course, he is an embodiment of the Secretariat. But—

LITTLEJOHNS: Because, after all, the members of the Secretariat are the thousand guys who have been affected.

SENGWE: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: So it's not the Secretariat per se that's doing it, it's the Secretary-General.

MENON: Could I ask you, about the Secretariat, it's been an established rule in the UN that UN staff should be paid as much as the highest paid national civil service, and the International Civil Service Commission recommended nearly two years ago that salaries need to be raised, that the UN salaries are no longer comparable with the highest paid civil service, which is now no longer the United States, it's Germany. What is being done about that whole area?

SENGWE: It is an area Member States are concerned about. Because Member States would like to attract the best talent on the market, and therefore that is an issue Member States are looking at with a view to recommending to the General Assembly the possible raises in salaries, so that it's at par with the highest paid civil service.

NGUYEN: But the United States has opposed that salary raise asked by the Committee that approves all the budget recommendations.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States argues that UN Secretariat staff are overpaid.

SENGWE: Well, of course, as you know, there is no complete agreement on the issue, but it's an issue that is still under debate, and—because there is no agreement. But the reports that have been submitted to the Committee are such that the Member States will have to look at this, it can't be swept under the rug, as it were.

MENON: Is there a time-frame for this to come to a conclusion?

SENGWE: It has to be concluded by the end of the 51st session, which is by September.

LITTLEJOHNS: September '97.

SENGWE: '97, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sengwe, we have only a few seconds left. You mentioned that the Secretariat staff are the UN's greatest asset. In fact, it seems that the morale of the staff is rather low. Is there anything—partly because of this down-sizing, uncertainty, the lack of permanent contracts any more, and so on—is there anything the Fifth Committee can do about that? Just in the few seconds we have left?

SENGWE: The Fifth Committee expresses concern about the morale of the staff, and in that vein the Fifth Committee invited the representative of staff to speak to the Committee with a view to finding, to getting from, as it were, from the trenches, what's going on, so....

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Sengwe, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Ngoni Francis Sengwe, Chairman of the Fifth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. He was interviewed by Tuyet Nguyen of United Press International and Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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